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Judge says lesbian's firing not religious discrimination

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- A federal judge has dismissed a claim that a Baptist children's home's firing of a lesbian employee amounted to religious discrimination.

Observers said the decision could foreshadow similar conflicts under President Bush's plan to increase the role of religious organizations in providing social services.

Civil-rights laws "protect religious freedom, not personal lifestyle choices," U.S. District Judge Charles Simpson said in a July 23 ruling.

Simpson refused, however, to dismiss a related claim that the fact the religiously based home receives state funds violates the separation of church and state. The judge said that part of the case could move forward.

Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children fired Alicia Pedreira from her job as a family specialist in 1998 after learning she is a lesbian. Officials said homosexuality is contrary to "core values" of the agency of the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

Pedreira and another woman, who said the policy prohibited her from seeking employment, filed the suit in federal court last year claiming religious discrimination and violation of the First Amendment ban on the establishment of religion.

Simpson's ruling threw out the religious-discrimination portion of the suit, however. "Intentional exclusion of homosexuals from employment does not run afoul of Title VII (of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) unless it constitutes discrimination on the basis of religion," he wrote in his decision.

"It was the behavior -- the acceptance and/or practice of a homosexual lifestyle -- which constituted the basis for the employment action, not the belief or practice of religion," he ruled.

Bill Smithwick, president of Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children, said he is pleased with the judge's ruling concerning religious discrimination.

"It is by no means over for us," Smithwick said, but "it's good to have that part behind us."

"We've contended all along we've not been in violation of any local, state or federal law," he said. "I think the judge's ruling vindicates us on that."

Eric Ferrero, a spokesman for American Civil Liberties Union, which represents Pedreira along with Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, said lawyers had not yet decided whether to appeal the religious-discrimination claims.

"Alicia Pedreira was fired for reasons deeply related to religion," Ferrero said. "If KBHC were a private institution, that would be their right. ... Once you're publicly funded things shift a little bit. You don't get to have it both ways."

State contracts account for about 75 percent of the children's homes' annual income, but Smithwick said the agency would walk away from government money rather than compromise its identity.

Smithwick said referrals from the state have dropped over the past two years, in part because of the firing controversy.

Left unresolved in Simpson's ruling are claims that Baptist Homes for Children violates the Constitution by using public funds for "religious indoctrination of children under its care."

Smithwick predicted the case would be "precedent setting" in a growing debate over partnerships between government and faith-based ministries.

"Organizations like ours can provide a very meaningful social service and not be coercive in our mission and our religion," he said. "On the other hand, if too many restraints are put on faith-based organizations like ours, we lose our identity and our very uniqueness that make us effective."

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said he believes the case "speaks volumes about the kind of activities we'll see if President Bush's faith-based initiative becomes law."

"Religious groups will be able to pass the collection plate to taxpayers, but still be permitted to discriminate," Lynn said. "That's morally wrong and it should be illegal."

Paul Simmons, a former professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary who is one of seven plaintiffs in the lawsuit, also criticized the faith-based initiative.

"President Bush has made it a crusade to launch an initiative against the separation of church and state, which I think is badly misguided and badly misinformed," said Simmons, a professor at the University of Louisville. "A lot of groups want public funds to ease their own fiscal crunch. The faith-based initiative should be opposed and opposed very strongly."

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Scholar recommends spiritual 'exercise'

By Ken Camp

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- "No pain, no gain" applies to spiritual as well as physical exercise, according to a scholar specializing in spiritual disciplines.

Just as physical fitness requires exercise, spiritual fitness also requires certain disciplines, Deirdre LaNoue told Baptist women gathered July 26-28 at Baylor University for the Texas Leadership Conference, sponsored by Woman's Missionary Union of Texas.

A former history professor at Dallas Baptist University, LaNoue was recently named professor of spiritual formations at Mount St. Joseph's College in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Spiritual disciplines -- such as Bible study, prayer and reading of classical devotional writings -- help Christians build stamina to endure life's challenges, she said.

"The world will wear us out -- sometimes the church will wear us out, unintentionally -- if we don't have a fitness plan to keep us connected [to Christ]," LaNoue said.

In addition to having a salvation experience, she said, spiritually fit leaders must learn to "abide in the vine," as Jesus taught in the Gospel of John.

She pointed to five elements of "abiding" in Christ, some borrowed from other Christian traditions:

-- Prayer. Constant communication with God requires the disciplines of solitude, silence and slowing down long enough to listen, she said. "We must listen to the voice of the One who calls us beloved. Otherwise, we will get sidetracked."

-- Scripture. Most Baptist churches do well at involving members in regular, systematic Bible study, LaNoue said. But the challenge is to "study God's Word with integrity, to not just pick and choose those things we agree with or want to hear."

-- Spiritual reading. She encouraged Baptist women to read with discernment classic Christian literature. "There is refreshment in reading the writing of other believers. We can learn so much from the saints who have gone before us."

-- Accountability. LaNoue encouraged Baptist women to seek out what Quakers call "weighty friends" -- mature believers with depth and wisdom who will hold them accountable. Christianity is lived out in community, and small accountability groups or partners can help remind believers, "We are not able to do it alone. We need one another."

-- Rest. Jesus set the example by taking time away from the crowds. Leaders should resist the notion that they "don't have permission to rest" because they are not accomplishing anything during hours at rest.

"Rest really can be a holy thing," she said. "Set yourself free to rest."

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Texas church committed to transforming community

By Ken Camp

BEAUMONT, Texas (ABP) -- When Frederick Mattox arrived as pastor of Mt. Rose Missionary Baptist Church in Beaumont, Texas, in 1990, he found a battleground.

On the edge of downtown, East Gladys Street was home to three crack houses and a gambling shack. Twenty to 25 drug deals took place every day on a street corner within sight of the church.

"It was a community and a church under siege," Mattox says. "We were surrounded and landlocked on all sides."

Viewing the challenge as spiritual warfare, the new pastor hit the streets. He prayed with dealers and their customers on the street corners, and the church began a Thursday evening meal for people in the area -- addicts and their suppliers included.

Mattox began attending local Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, earning the trust of the people who struggled with chemical dependencies.

In the process, he says, God transformed the lives not only of individuals but a whole neighborhood.

"The guys out on the street started getting saved," Mattox says.

Mt. Rose launched a "Recovering Christian Addicts" program for new believers who were fighting old habits. In time, participants in the program became a vital part of the congregation, swelling the membership from about 125 to 600.

A former drug dealer now serves as assistant Sunday school superintendent. A recovering addict is an assistant pastor. A "Recovering Christian Addicts Choir" often leads in worship.

The church also started ministries to children and youth in the neighborhood, providing school supplies, hot meals and special gifts at Christmas.

"Why holiday ministries?" Mattox asks. "When I came to the church, I found out that dope dealers

bought bicycles for the kids at Christmas. Then two months later, they would come back and have the kids use those bicycles to run dope for them. What was used for evil, we have turned around and are using for good."

The church also began physically to reclaim the neighborhood. Mt. Rose purchased property, beginning with a lot immediately east of the church where the three crack houses stood. Church members tore down the crack houses and built in their place a tennis court for youth and a playground for children in the community.

Once a hotbed for violent crime, East Gladys Street is now clean, well lighted and peaceful. "There hasn't been a murder on that street in 10 years," Mattox says.

The ministries of Mt. Rose Missionary Baptist Church have attracted widespread attention. Earlier this year, Mattox received a "Community Champion" award from the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse and was named a local "Jefferson Award" winner by the American Institute for Public Service.

Mt. Rose has financed most of its ministries itself, with minimal assistance from outside its membership, including gifts from a Baptist General Convention of Texas missions offering.

Additional Texas Baptist involvement is anticipated when Mt. Rose launches the next phase of its master plan -- starting a Baptist mission center in an abandoned corner cafe.

"We want to have an identifiable, visible Baptist work in the community," Mattox explains.

Just because the center is designed to serve poor people, that is no reason it should appear shabby or second-rate, Mattox notes.

"The poor have dignity, too," he says. "We want the center to be nice."

In addition to providing a place to distribute clothing and non-perishable food to needy families, the center also can serve as a site for after-school tutoring and distributing school supplies to students, and as a learning environment for computer training and literacy classes.

Mattox also hopes the center will become a place of both physical and spiritual healing for community residents.

"We are in a medically underserved area," he says.

The new missions center will provide the church a place to offer one-day free clinics, making available immunizations for children, mammograms for women and prescription assistance for the elderly.

But spiritual transformation remains as the ultimate goal, Mattox emphasizes.

"We want to provide spiritual counsel. We're not here just to hand out goodies. We're here to share the message of Christ," he says.

"Our community is in need. We want them to see the love of Jesus through our holistic ministries. I'm driven by the desire to see each and every person pursue a quality life -- here and for all eternity."

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